

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
May 29, 2023

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Please.

One hundred and fifty-five years ago, retired Union General James Garfield spoke here at Arlington, marking our Nation's first Memorial Day. Standing amid rows and rows of marble stones, many of his own fallen soldiers among them, he asked: "What brought these men here? What high motive led them to . . . welcome death?" And he answered his own question. He said, "Our Nation's life."

My fellow Americans, Jill, Vice President Harris, Second Gentleman Emhoff, Secretary Austin, Secretary McDonough, Secretary Mayorkas, General Milley, and most importantly, veterans, service men and women, and their survivors: Today we once again gather in this sacred place, at this solemn hour, to honor fallen heroes, to once again stand amid the rows and rows of marble stones and bear witness to the brave women and men who served and sacrificed for our freedom and for our future; those who died so our Nation might live.

Every year, as a nation, we undertake this rite of remembrance, for we must never forget the price that was paid to protect our democracy. We must never forget the lives these flags, flowers, and marble markers represent: a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a sister, a spouse, a friend. An American.

Every year, we remember. And every year, it never gets easier.

To all those here and across the Nation who are grieving the loss of a loved one who wore the uniform, our Gold Star families, and to all those with loved ones still missing, unaccounted for, I know how painful it can be, how it can reopen that—rip open that black hole in the center of your chest you feel like you're just sinking into, bringing you back to that exact moment you heard that knock on the door or the telephone ring, the exact moment you had to tell your children that mom or dad would not be coming home.

The hurt is still real. It's still raw.

Tomorrow marks 8 years since we lost our son Beau. Our losses are not the same. He didn't perish in the battlefield. It was cancer that stole him from us a year after being deployed as a major in the United States Army National Guard in Iraq.

As it is for so many of you, the pain of his loss is with us every day, but particularly sharp on Memorial Day. It's still clear. Tomorrow is his anniversary. But so is the pride Jill and I feel in his service, as if I can still hear him saying, "Dad—it's my duty, Dad." "It's my duty." Duty.

That was the code my son lived by and all those you lost lived by. It's the creed that millions of servicemembers have followed—from the fields of Yorktown to the shores of Normandy, to the rice paddies of Pusan, to the valleys of Kandahar, to the mountains of Sinjar, and beyond—many of whom never returned home.

Throughout history, these women and men laid down their lives, not for a place or a person or a President, but for an idea unlike any other idea in all of human history, the idea—the idea—of the United States of America.

This sanctuary honors that sacrifice and tells their stories. And in turn, it tells our story—the American story: a story of the patriot who died to deliver a nation where everyone is entitled to certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness; the story of

hundreds of thousands of soldiers who shed their blood to make these words real; the story of the brave Americans who fought the forces of fascism and died for preservation of democracy.

As we're reminded by the hundreds of graves here in Section 60 of Arlington and across our Nation—the story of the women and men who sacrificed everything to keep democracy safe and secure during the last two decades—each of them—each of them a link in a chain of honor that stretches back to our Founding Fathers and those days. Unbreaking, unbending, not just in their duty and devotion, but something even deeper: in their faith in us—their faith in us—that we will be worthy of their sacrifice.

Our servicemembers have always embodied the highest expectations of our democracy. They've always held faith in our country, in all that we could be: a citadel of liberty, a beacon of freedom. For our democracy is our strength, the wellspring of possibilities, and the source of endless, endless renewal.

It's how we've been able to constantly change and adapt through the centuries. It's why we've always emerged from every challenge we face stronger than we entered it. It's how we come together as one Nation, united, and why there's nothing we can't do in America when we do it together.

It's a truth we celebrate this year as we mark 75 years of a desegregated military, 75 years of women's full integration, 50 years of an All-Volunteer force. Throughout the annals of history, our troops have fought for our democracy and, if necessary, died for it. And today, their service and sacrifice, and that of their families, echoes far beyond those silent stones out there.

We see it in the strength of our NATO alliance, built from the bonds that we forever forged in the fires of two World Wars. We see it in the troops still standing sentinel on the Korean Peninsula, preserving peace side by side with our allies. We see it at every base, every barrack, every vessel around the globe where our military proudly serves and stands as a force for good in the world.

And just as they have kept the ultimate faith to our country, to our democracy, we must keep the ultimate faith to them. As a nation—and people have all heard me say this for a long time—as a nation, we have many obligations, but I believe with every fiber of my being we have only one truly sacred obligation: to prepare those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they come home and when they don't.

It's a sacred obligation, not based on party or politics, but on a promise, a promise to unite all of us. There is nothing more important, nothing more sacred, nothing more American.

But together, over the last 2½ years, we've worked to make good on that promise, passing more than 25 bipartisan laws to support our servicemembers, their families, caregivers, and survivors.

That includes the PACT Act, the most significant law in our Nation's history, to help millions of veterans who were exposed to toxic substances and burn pits during their military service. Pits the size of football fields that incinerated the wastes of war such as tires, chemicals, jet fuel, and so much more.

Too many of our Nation's warriors that have selflessly served only to return home and suffer from the permanent effects of this poisonous smoke. Too many have died—excuse the personal reference—like my son Beau, or like Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson, for whom the act is named. Last year, after I signed the PACT Act, I handed the pen to his daughter Brielle. She and her grandmother are with us today.

After I handed her the pen, this beautiful little girl, who's sitting over there—thank you for waving, baby—[applause]—who had lost half of her world—her whole world—held the pen in

her hand, and looked at me and said, "Thank you for my daddy." "Thank you for my daddy." God love you, honey.

But I don't think she was just thanking me. She was thanking all of us, everyone who fought so hard and came together to keep our promise to our veterans, to keep faith with our heroes.

On this day, we come together again to reflect, to remember, but above all, to recommit to the future our fallen heroes fought for, that generations of servicemembers who died for a future grounded in freedom, democracy, equality, tolerance, opportunity, and yes, justice. We use those words all the time, but we've seen of late here, and around the world, that they have to continually be fought for, not just for some, but for all.

This is more important than just our system of government. It's the very soul of America: a soul that was forged by our Nation's first patriots; a soul that triumphed over trials and testing less than a century later; a soul that endured because of the sacrifices of generations and generations of the servicemembers ever since.

Together, we're not just the fortunate inheritors of their legacy. We must be the keeper of their mission, the bearers of the flame of freedom that kept burning bright for nearly 247 years.

That—that's the truest memorial to their lives: our actions every day to ensure that our democracy endures, our Constitution endures, and the soul of our Nation and our decency endures.

Ladies and gentlemen, 155 years ago, our ancestors stood here and asked themselves: What brought our heroes to this hallowed ground? What high motive led these brave souls, as General Garfield said, to welcome death?

Today, we must ask ourselves what can we do, what must we do to uphold the vision for which they lived and which they died. Today, it's on all of us—all of us—to ensure that sacrifice was not in vain; to keep working toward a more perfect Union, one where all women and all men are created equal.

We're the only nation in the world built on an idea. Every other nation is formed based on things like geography, ethnicity, religion. We're the only nation in the world built on an idea that we're all created equal. We haven't always lived up to it, but we've never walked away from it.

And today, standing together to honor those Americans who dared all and gave all for our Nation, we can say clearly: We never will.

God bless who gave—all those who gave their lives so our Nation might live, God bless their families, and may God protect our troops, today and always.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:41 a.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA; and Sandusky, OH, resident Susan Zeier, mother-in-law of the late Sfc. Heath Robinson.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Austin, Lloyd J., III; Biden, Jill T.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Harris, Kamala D.; Mayorkas, Alejandro N.; McDonough, Denis R.; Milley, Mark A.; Robinson, Brielle; Zeier, Susan.

Subjects: Diversity, equity, and inclusion, improvement efforts; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Memorial Day; Military families; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Secretary of Defense; Secretary of Homeland Security; Secretary of Veterans Affairs; U.S. servicemembers, environmental exposures in war zones; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Veterans, health and medical care; Vice President; Virginia, Arlington National Cemetery; Virginia, President's visit.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300476.